

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

1993

Jailhouse Springs

Robert Hackett

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

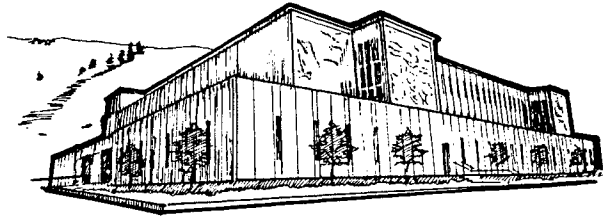
Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Hackett, Robert, "Jailhouse Springs" (1993). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 2774.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2774>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.



Maureen and Mike MANSFIELD LIBRARY

The University of
Montana

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

**** Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature****

Yes, I grant permission ☒

No, I do not grant permission ☐

Author's Signature Robert J. Hackett

Date: 11/29/93

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.

Jailhouse Springs

By

Robert Hackett

B.A., Dartmouth College, 1986

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts


University of Montana

1993

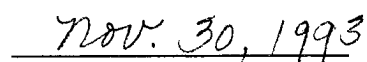
Approved by



Chairman



Dean, Graduate School



Date

UMI Number: EP35683

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP35683

Published by ProQuest LLC (2012). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

Jailhouse Springs

Contents

1 Painting the Circle

The Camera	2
Orange Street Bridge, January	3
Soil	4
Waiting for the Cats	5
Sanderlings	6
Almost Cider Time	7
Florida Creek Road	8
Mona's Homesick Donut Hut	9
Breakfast in Hungry Horse	11
Sick Farm	12
Putting Down the Instrument	13
Jailhouse Springs	14

2 Boats and Smoke

Return to Hungry Horse	17
Tanganyika	18
Changing Trains, Irun	19
<i>Coffea Arabica</i>	20
Forgetting the Temple	25
For the Ferryman: Five Crossings	26
Isaiah 18: The Promised Land	30
The Camel	31

3 Night Birds

My Old Room	33
Meditation at Golconda	34
Oklahoma Here I Come	36
Letter to Mom from Rock Creek	37
Howe's Clearing	38
K Street	39
Variations on Vern	41
My Neighborhood	42
The Rounds: Franklin County, Vermont	43
All There Is	45
Making Beds	46

Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of some of these poems have appeared in the following journals:

Camas: “Meditation at Golconda”

Poet Lore: “Sick Farm”

1

Painting the Circle

The Camera

It was surprising, the beautiful way it rendered the rocks, the scarecrows, the black feathers. It was uncanny how it sensed the flavor of the season, the empty branches and the rifles. The river scuttling beneath the bridge, the abandoned nests. It was as if there were only October, no other imaginable light than jack-o-lanterns on cold porches. Every dead gourd seemed ready for the harvest. The film aspired to a perfection beyond the brown stubble and black ponds, beyond the crumbling cabin and the combines fanning the fields for miles. The film revealed houses that were no longer standing, fences where there were now parking lots, barns where there ought to have been nothing but shadows. And the camera propped on the pumphouse, shining in the moonlight.

Orange Street Bridge, January

I walk this bridge, cross over
the winter-jammed river every morning
to witness the evolution of ice
in the night, the frozen continents
crushing into ridge and foothill
and valley, a sphere taking shape
in the dark. Morning snow

covers the tracks
of a northbound pack of dogs.
What has become the eastern plain
of the divide remains wild, beyond,
a tundra of no tracks.

Names erupt from my mouth.
The wind won't stake a claim.
Animals leave only signs.

Like the first man
with the whole cold creation
before me, I choose to settle
at the end of a dogleg valley
with a southwest slope and a creek that runs
full to song through September.

All winter long I sharpen my knives
and preach to myself from the Old Testament.
My wife finally flees the reek
of old meat, and my daughter eventually marries
a Swede from the desert down valley.
The ridge keeps me isolated and nobody visits.
It crests higher every spring until, at last,
it sends a decade of glaciers
that close the valley for good.

The thaw promises a change
I won't believe in, one that threatens
to erase this map
I've come to know, to sweep
away this island I hear
thundering out my name.

Soil

Imagine a civilization she said
whose idol is soil not its green seed
but its creation

deities of ice and canyon
the glacial crush
slow gods of river and wind
shaped stone

carved feet the jump the crawl
we arrive any way we can
emerging or descending or resisting

imagine she said a creation intent on seeing
calling itself up from dark
to trunks of rain mouths of flowers
to eat the blooms of ancient sea-bottoms
tides dried to sockets
to remember
the vanishing of water

Waiting for the Cats

The cats comb the night grass
with their familiar black music.
We huddle at the mouths of deep caves
as the ice migrates closer and closer each year.
Two million years of night and babies
sense the watch, the way their jaws
fit our bones perfectly.

Dinofelis.
We need to talk about you,
find a way to see in the dark.
Terrible Cat.
Always questions of location.
Fear-Cat. The boys want to dance for you.
They want to chant away your appetite.
We grow cold imagining ways to kill you,
arriving finally at stories

of blood and victory.
We're forever ready for the night to scream.
Cave-Cat, Fear-Cat.
We sing love songs waiting for you.

for Bruce Chatwin

Sanderlings

The beach, with its stones
like commas, seems unwritten,
 a weathered transition
 between cliff and sand;
 salt-pause of process.

Shorebirds skit in front
 of draping breakers
backlit by the hot palette
 of fire-swallowing horizon,
pink reflection of sky burning
on white belly feathers
 of buff-breasted sanderlings,
gathered now at the frothy tongue
 of tide's highest reach,
the black-billed dance

of foam and wing
 suspended for that necessary moment
of stasis that cannot endure.

 The sanderlings now charge
the retreating sea
in a frenzied hunt for worm
 and mollusk that lasts only seconds
before they, too, fall back,
 following the ocean's lead
of wave and spray.

 Again, the sanderlings wait
 at the surf's edge
 for the unveiling of life
they know lies beneath
the surface.

Almost Cider Time

The drifter has been sleeping in the orchard for a week. We see him each morning as he wakes and brushes the blanket of moths from his shoulders. One of his eyes is a storm on the bay and the other a swallow's wing. The moths lift like clouds and sift through the deer fences, past the cypress row, and into the meadows of wild radish, where hungry swallows swoop their fat white bodies and dusty wings. By twilight only the chosen return to the pale-washed apples dissolving like sugar in the full September moon. To the sour drifter's body that emerges to the sun like a mummy.

Florida Creek Road

The Circle K flickers like a temple
on the midnight road, marking the path
like a pile of shivering stones, the pale roar
of Arcturus sounding the boundary
of farmers' summer fields, warning
that everything beyond this constellation
of corn and plow is claw.

At the fence-edge of the store's fluorescence
an early '70s Volkswagen Bus
lies gutted in a hemorrhage of oil,
its rear engine hatch propped open
in a dismembered bleat
for one more chance to hide
in the flock's dizzy center,

to never again realize
the horror of the fringe,
where the likely driver lurks
with bearded face faintly lit
and his paw-thumb thrust into shadow.
By the time I stop to let him in,
I'm ready to offer throat.

Mona's Homesick Donut Hut

A few miles out of town
disorder doesn't count
as much. The carving swing
of highway, the steep rise
of ridge and cool stroke of creek
keep things in their place.
Mona's Donut Hut belongs here.
At the counter, I flip
through the newspaper's rentals.
"Whachya lookin' for?"
Mona asks in a steaming
pour of coffee. Beyond
the open window
on a fencepost in the pasture
a bluebird ponders
her slow song,
listening to the throated notes
ring in the sweet-hay wind.
She flies to a stand of ponderosa
at the climbing edge of slope,
to her hollow home
in a rotted stump.

Mona slides over a chocolate donut
on an aqua-rimmed plate.
My coffee's gone cold.

If only I could find some
clear, easy niche in this town,
a rutted alley garage,
a windowless basement
with wrinkled paisley carpet,
a bare 40-watt bulb
dangling in a cold kitchen
whose sink measures time

in loud, tinny drips,
like the one in Mona's.
If only I could arrange
this new life like the neat,
wiped rows in the glass cooler,
bottles of Heinz and A-1
in perfect lines next to
the Tabasco and Worcestershire.
But it's the use that creates
its own space for things,
the underbelly of an interstate bridge,
a splintered lightning-struck pine,
the trash can catching white drips of grease
from the fan above the grill.

Breakfast in Hungry Horse

The stuffed life-sized Elvis
and one-armed Indian envy
your freedom to turn, to leave.
But you stay, recognizing
the huckleberry pancakes and t-shirts,
the juicy glass globes that dangle
above the buffalo-blessed entrance
bleed for you. You eat here every morning,
breaking promises to the mounted wolverine,
half-bear, half-you, a hybrid
of oblivion. Bighorns pose
in the wildlife sanctuary, alert, civilized.
In the corner Elvis winks, swings his hips
in one stiff circle, coaxing shudders
from the married cashier. If the coffee
spits at you one more time, you'll
order mint tea and mean it. Who says
you only live once? The mountain lion
picks a copy of the Constitution
in her hollow paws, plans to run
for office once elk are equal.
There's a crack in the counter
the quarters you leave under your plate
can't fix. Where the cafe ends
and the souvenir shop begins is a border
you tell yourself you don't want to cross,
but those plastic pigeon-feathered tomahawks
feel so good in your grip all you want
is a fast horse, a leather suit,
all you want is to kill
your own wild breakfast.

Sick Farm

Moths sprout in the mossy rain
from moon-ripe cocoons,
probe their deepest luminous attractions
and vanish. Barbed wire fences
wield their rusty fangs pointlessly,
since the cabbages want to stay
where the river water is sweet
with kisses of trout
and there's plenty of time
to curl each new, not-yet-cabbage
leaf into a healthy, twisted self
worthy of teeth. A puddle
near the beets frolics,
a pool where cutworms and beetles,
drunk with abundance, sing
"There's no work like no work!"
all night long. Nightcrawlers
wave in the black breeze
like wheat, shackling
the dark in deep veins
that tentacle cool roots
with fog. The sick lose
all imagination by morning.

Putting Down the Instrument

We told the conductor we would play it right, next time, if we could take a walk that very minute. In this the flutes and tympanies were united. We locked the music in the square room with pinholes in the walls. It was June and the sidewalks smelled of rain. The conductor is an alright guy, but he never takes us anywhere. Detroit is Detroit, as the tuba player says. And you have to respect a body that survives such a horn. The puffy lips and varicose veins. The social stigma. His high school band teacher told him he was a born tuba player. It's only when he puts the instrument down and floats from his big chair out over the empty music stands like a disintegrating dandelion that he doubts it.

Jailhouse Springs

My fingers smell like strange plants.
In the shade of a juniper I scratch my slimy back.
I lick my lips and continue
walking through the canyon of roses,
praising the absence of thorns,
to the ruins where finches sing.

There, a ladder descends into an empty kiva.
There are no voices.
Six small holes in the mud wall
look down at me where I stand.
Rabbitbrush along the trail invites nothing to eat it.
I imagine the hundred uses of corn as a weapon.

On the rock above the ruin,
as high as the last man could paint,
are three circles.
One is full and white with green dots scored in vertical rows,
One is white with two eyes,
One is empty with three white bars.
There are no other clues.

I scramble up to the passageway
of the ledge. There is only one way in.
Did the last man ever descend,
satisfied, with his paint and grass brushes?

I crawl through the crack in the rock,
and emerge head first into the light of the canyon.
and peer out each of the six small eyeholes,
I see myself staring at the circular images.
I see myself striking flint and chert.
I see myself drinking from the cold spring,

savoring the taste of the dark below.
I see my horse sleeping in the shade of a cottonwood.
I see a painted man hiding in the rocks behind me.
I see my flute slip from my sandy hands.

Up close, the paintings reveal nothing.
I hear stones being moved at the entrance
of the passageway. I hear the sound of running feet.
Alone in the canyon's last light,
I sit and imagine what to paint
in my own ochre circle.

2

Boats and Smoke

Return to Hungry Horse

The buffalo still waits on wheels at the cafe,
but it's not funny anymore.
All day long it's not funny.
Inside, the museum does its best to cajole
me into irony; the mortified ungulates,
the guns, the plastic beachball huckleberries.
When can I taxidermy *my* eyes?

I step back and forth across the border,
erasing every dead detail from the scene,
trying to imagine some other country
where anything seems possible.
I even imagine New Jersey,
but the buffalo is there, posed on its squeaky silver wheels
at the edge of the continent
like a true patriot.

Fixing its hoary gaze out across the waves,
the buffalo rolls into the hungry surf, foaming first over the black hooves
then higher, up to the wispy, arcing bull-shaft,
the furious eyes, the horns, the surging crest of shoulder.
The buffalo charges on like a buffalo now, spewing froth
and a line of bubbles that trails off
past the jetty as the serious coulees
draw down to the bottom
of a real, expansive sea.

Tanganyika

The boats, with their ribbed nets winging off the rails, struggle like insects on the water. The boys command flea-red dogs to swim in the pink water. They whack each other in the head with sticks while their fathers gut fish on the shore. You gaze across the lake to the silhouette of another country. I smell smoke. Soon the boys assemble before us. One of the smaller boys approaches with one hand behind his back, as if to offer something. I make to accept what appears to be a playing card. He turns it slowly, revealing the ace of spades, and as I grasp it he vows, "Ce n'est plus à moi." A chrome fish jumps in the lake.

In my palm, the ace points west, to a plume of smoke whistling across the water where the monkeys experiment with fire. I hold the card to my lips and kiss that black heart for what must be seconds before I tuck it between my belt and belly. The boys begin twisting all that they have seen in their minds as you start to dance in the lavender light.

Changing Trains, Irun

I descend to a cornflower sea rising to the green cliffs. A boy waves furiously from the stern of a low blue boat trolling out to the shoals. As if he knew. The electric rails are dull as pencils in the sun. Pointing to a moored dinghy, the boy urges me to join him. Eels as thick as legs lurk in the shallows. I can see their dumb jaws from here as they swim behind the boy and his boat like guitars. The word flares up: "Rescue." I smell jasmine as I crush the cigarette. The boy is shaving his great grey beard as the eels pop the waves like trout. I am on the verge of speaking Swedish to the quiet girl from Portsmouth. I burn my fingers on the matches. I watch the jade sea scatter blue splinters in a perfect radius. I hand the conductor two strange coins he appears to recognize and climb back on board.

Coffea Arabica

I.
A lull is always
 a good time to start a shift.
 The sleek metal counters

are all wiped clean
 and the gently steaming
 obedient machines hum

to operas and concertos.
 Outside the buildings grow
 under gentle winter rain

like shrubs
 with tap-roots worming
 to the energy-pith,

erupting in a column of fire
 and nervous glass flowers.
 Across Second Avenue

looms the Federal Building,
 whose seventh floor is filled
 with DEA and FBI agents

in sweat pants and gym shoes.
 They try to look like regular guys.
 I know this, because

I'm their connection; I represent
 the cartel. Our clients are bankers
 lawyers secretaries developers

timber executives bike messengers
 accountants architects -- all addicts.
 We deal to the monolith

of marble and steel,
 one-block wide
 two-blocks high.

II.
The shanties of Embu
have aluminum roofs
like rusty flamingos poised
for flight that lift against gravity
away from their plots
 in this dusty design
 of hovel.

The people are better
than their dwellings.
They walk miles each day,
past the paling dead corn,
with sprouting backs
 and speaking hands
 and listening feet.

Now and then, however,
a man goes wielding a panga.
You can read it in the Nairobi papers,
all about the strange
behavior of villagers up north;
 a blind-fury of beer
 and frustration, a butchering

of wife, neighbor, boss.
Scarlet strokes of steel
and black. Blood stripes
the walls like a cage,
and the sticky red earth
 leaves its mark
 with every step.

III.

Today's Coffee of the Day is Kenya AA.
Medium-bodied, with a slight tang
and a hint of berry in the bouquet,

a new crop.

On the store's walls hang photographs
of dark warehouses

and burlap sacks bulge
with hard green beans
and tired-looking men

hiding their teeth.
Next to the display case
a group of workers

rests on its labored
sacks of coffee,
gazing as if in a theater

at our company's buyer
as he expounds on the qualities
he wants in a bean.

He holds a bean in his hand
as if he's about to eat it.
It's impossible not to notice

the older man in the back row
who stares beyond the loading bay,
bright with equator-light,

lost, it seems, in a vision
of a time when the land
didn't need to be worked,

IV.

Coffea Arabica.

Qahwah in Arabic. Kahve in Turkish.

Caffe in Italian. Coffee.

Seven centuries from
the Yemeni port of Mocca

to Asia Minor and the Mediterranean,
where the Italians got serious
and applied themselves
to the alchemy of that perfect
bitter extraction.

It starts with roasting,
the pulling of oils from the hard ovule
by fire. Then the pulverizing
of bean to dust in the mill
like rich, fertile earth.

The transcendence of aroma.
I journey in my mind as my hands
work the grinder and tamp
the portafilter with the deliberation
of a junkie with spoon and candle.

The process demands
to be done right, and gives
its own pleasure in the doing.
The machine arouses water
to the edge of boil, and doles it out

by the ounce. I push
the button and sense the swelling
of water and coffee,
the sound of pressure,
the anticipation of that slow

black stream. The pour
foams in the glass,
a three-layered perfection
of espresso, crema, and the orgy
of the two as they slowly disentangle,

a smooth brown foam.
The first, and last, sip is deep,
spraying espresso in every corner of the mouth,
tongue, teeth, lips, throat,
each to taste that bitter wonder of bean.

V.
Lanceolate leaves, like spears.
Dark Abyssinian warriors
crushed fire-berries of *arabica*,
rolled them with balls of fat. Skin-
pouches of smoky food
 for the night run,
 the dawn raid.

Shadow-chant return
to the deep-veined highland plains
of mountain-tendriled *arabica*,
evergreen savannah shrub, lava-
flowered shaman of soil and rain,
 desert gift of power,
 plant-child of volcanos.

Forgetting the Temple

Let's leave the camera at home this time. I want to forget it all. The way the sun in Crete blossoms on your neck. The way your neck wraps around mine, and we kiss like stamens wild with the wind. Do they still run those mines in the hills where the parrots are extinct? And that feeling every time we change money: gratification. No tricks. Just temples half-buried, emerging as stones, and a bald man flapping in the dust. And those boats, the way they sink full of eels like a heart or a fresh-minted coin skimming across the waves. Like a bee too fat to leave the flower.

For the Ferryman: Five Crossings

I. Akula

Geography and palm wine win again.
 The ferry captain, drunk on the far shore,
 called it a day at three. We set up camp
 near a sandy mud-walled storehouse.
 Mosquitos muster in the twilight like the crowd
 of mumbling men and children
 who point at the tent. A boy
 asks to go inside -- he climbs through the screen door,
 traces the arcing dome with his eyes,
 humming to show he's not afraid.
 A small market has budded among the stranded travelers:
 shrunken dried fish, peanuts, avocados, canned
 Canada herring, a tea stand. Night falls fast
 and the fires of Akula flare across the river.
 The boy steps out of the tent,
 cool but proud, and reports:
 "It's like a sky without stars."

II. Likoni

The sweet curry sun
 shines off blue swells.
 Breakers roll sapphire into Mombasa Bay.
 Crows drift from branch to branch
 in scarlet-flowered trees
 while quick-eyed boys sell frozen juice
 to the line of ferry passengers
 waiting to cross to Likoni and the southern villages.
 On the thick wooden rail across from me
 leans a young Masai with long ochre *marani* braids
 tied with beads, a red cloth draped over his shoulder
 and tucked at his flat dark waist.
 It strikes me that we're probably the same age,
 a savannah-walker waiting for a boat,

the humid air of the coast
 drawing beads of sweat to skin
 more used to dust than clouds;
 and me, a traveler in the throng for no other reason
 than to be somewhere different,
 going nowhere, really,
 waiting to arrive.

III. Kilifi

The Kilifi Inlet breathes in close,
 thick-leafed edge of forest and sea.
 A blind man stands in the shade
 beside the bus, rocking back and forth,
 haunting the air with his lonely flute,
 white hair and creamy eyes,
 lips quivering, dry and windy.
 His son sounds a drum at his side,
 bringing rhythm to the hollow, lofting notes
 that swoop through the air like swallows.
 I drop a few shillings into their empty can,
 trying not to break the beat, scraping the music
 with the tinny clank of coins,
 and move with the advancing crush of wheels
 to the open mouth of ferry.

V. Tana River

The driver sights the wooden tracks
 and eases the bus full of chickens,
 baskets, and perfectly silent babies
 onto the ferry. It sinks
 with the weight, but doesn't go under.
 The passengers file beside the bus
 and grab hold of the rope
 stretching across the river.
 Upriver, the Tana highlands

howl with baboons
 while the current draws down
 to the mangrove-scrub coast of the Indian Ocean.
 It's hot, and I'm glad to be standing, outside.
 I think of all the sleepy trips
 I've taken on Greyhound, all the rivers
 we cross unknowingly in the dark,
 how next time I want to pull my way
 across the Columbia,
 the Mississippi,
 the Snake.
 At the driver's cry
 we all lean back on the rope, children
 and grandparents, engaged
 in the work of travel.
 As we approach the opposite shore,
 we stop pulling
 and let the ferry drift
 onto the red mudbank.
 The rope burns my hands.

V. Oubangui

The customs officer in Zongo
 wants a present, "something small,"
 to remind him of us. I tell him
 in perfect English, "Not a chance."
 He smiles and points to Karen's camera.
 She stuffs it in her pack. He likes my watch.
 I put it in my pocket; everybody's smiling.
 The ferry from Bangui, our first big city since Nairobi,
 won't be here for another fifteen minutes.
 We see it now leaving the crowded dock across the river.
 The officer suggests things he'd like,
 and for fifteen minutes we tell him no,
 walking the line between upsetting him
 and being firm. Finally, he waves
 us away in disgust. The piroque arrives,

its 20hp Johnson motor spitting a rainbow of oil.
We settle in for our last crossing, still glad
for no bridge. The rapids downstream
throw fists of spray high into the air,
and chant the river faster and faster
in a flume of rock and roar.
The ferryman noses us into the current
like a compass needle.
The river smells like a river.

Isaiah 18: The Promised Land

Beyond the rivers of Sudan
there's a land where the sound of wings is heard,

where men hear feathers sing
prophecies of hollow bones, of delivery

from stony towns of calloused feet
and flaming beaks. They hear

the throats of the enemy,
Ears, the cut of wind.

The sound of wings.

Beyond the rivers of Sudan
The desert doesn't resist

the moon's ice, the hatred of sun.
It clutches the fallen frames of camels,

the symmetry of skin, the black circle
of eyes.

Yes, there it is.
I can hear it now:

the sound of wings

pulsing over carrion, slicing
the breath

with an edge
like, "Isaiah."

The Camel

Though we'd promised ourselves to be smart, the camel was cute. We puzzled over the eternal question, dromedary or bactrian? Which would we prefer? It seemed like a good idea to have Ahmed take our photo in front of the Great Pyramid on his camel, fake turbans blowing in the wind, my white legs dangling uselessly. "Free," Ahmed said, "no charge." The photo, the ride, all of it. We started out in the direction of Memphis, and I was deep into a consideration of Libyan oases when the moon crested above the city, still alive in the twilight. You thought you'd figured out the thirteen meanings of the beetle hieroglyph, none of which was "honey." Ahmed kept leading us farther into the white desert, but eventually grew tired, and climbed onto the animal to ride with us. At the edge of the horizon, beneath the first pale star, the shredded flags of an outpost lolled in the dying wind. Ahmed, trying to steer for the stone compound, shouted commands to the long hairy ears; the cold sand swallowed his voice. The camel, snorting its own wild language, turned to the opposite sky and walked on into the night, invincible.

3

Night Birds

My Old Room

Now that I've returned to this small room
with my thumbharp and my hunting knife,
the band can begin.
My old bed, beneath which all the instruments
are hidden, performs a perfect masquerade.
The goldfinches outside the window
scatter sun in the shade of a hemlock.
My voice is still locked in the closet
and won't be let out until it promises to sing.
The walls are bare and remember nothing.
Not the loud, barbaric departure
or the studious months I spent away in the desert.
Only the spiders are the same,
spinning their metal webs and starving,
listening to the distant choirs
across the marsh,
the cattails falling one by one.

Meditation at Golconda

It cinches the heart
tighter with every repetition—
Lovelock.

Here rivers vanish into sand.
Here the Union Pacific howls
in the perfect silence
of new-moon night, charging
over sea-floor sweeps
and rising rides of marine ridges,
lone headlight beaming
to the edge of darkness, steel
rails groaning through empty canyons.
Here the gas station attendant counts
my change twice, wrong twice.

Funnels of dust race along
the hardpan, stirring
the settled voices
of sage-fallen ranches,
a shadeless separation of weathered boards
and dried-up wells,
evaporated prayers for rain
which always comes in a silted torrent
that carries away the soil
and squanders it in a muddy
trail of stones and clay and lime.

From the driver's seat
a connection
is almost believable.
Climbing Golconda summit,
a blue Chevy pickup passes me slowly.
A man with Ray-Bans
and a full mustache
drives, and against his right side presses his girl,
so close in this country so vast

as if to bury that feeling between them,
shield it from slipping through the cracked wing-window.

My lips shrink
in the hot driving wind.
The interstate stretches to the horizon,
where earth and sky writhe
like serpents, spirits,
cheatgrass dancers
of stone and blood,
the ancient walkers,
their long black hair
and calloused feet,
the turning quiet
of basin and range,
the light flapping
of a hide door
in the cooling wind
of twilight.

Oklahoma Here I Come

My van craves this Oklahoma gasoline.
Every one of its 91 octanes.
Things are like that here, the racing,
the crashes. Not an octane wasted.
There's always something to die for,
the way the Red River wrinkles
like a skirt on our southern border,
the Panhandle, Muskogee in March,
the wild way we touch
just a little corner of Colorado.
There's always someone in the back seat
whining for home.
O! Oklahoma.

Tomorrow we dedicate the reservoir
to a rich widow from Tulsa.
She may arrive by helicopter
but the media doesn't think so.
She's the one who called Cesar Chavez
a prairie nigger, and never took it back.
Her grandfather was a Sooner,
in before the bell to claim half the Canadian River.
He found arrowheads in his fields for decades
and cursed every one.

Once the reservoir is full
and the stripes are painted in the parking lot,
we can boat until we're sick.
Sick of the sun, sick of the noise, sick of the rainbows
of gasoline expandind like a galaxy.
The dust rarely settles;

we are a reckless people,
full of the faith of the forgotten.
The derricks in the distance don't rust.
They'll creak on the horizon forever,
even after the oil is gone
and the coins have disappeared.
All we'll have to do is watch
that steel hammer strike
again and again
until the rock finally pays.

Letter to Mom from Rock Creek

Dear Mom: the bighorns have moved up high,
away from the yapping mongrel that haunts
the sagging grey barn. The weather fades
it badly, like that horrible house
the Huntley sisters shared, all those crying
cats and shade, the chicken shed rotting
by the stone wall that separated the fire road
from those rusty cleaving witches. Remember
those phone calls we'd get for the one sister
who talked, Elizabeth. I can't forget those twilight
walks up to their driveway, the gloomy way
their door splintered silently, the pine-needed
earth undulating with cats. I never
understood why the white-haired sister, dumb,
always answered the door with a face like an oven.
There are no witches here, only ghosts
of Indians and the steady hold of trout
who meet the river head on and flash.
It's February, not too cold, but the meadows
are months away. Hearing that old dog bark
makes me think how empty the kitchen must be
without that lame friend, Nazareth.
I suppose there's nothing left for old friends
to do but leave, even as we die with them.
Deer tracks wind down from the bluffs
to the cottonwoods and run with the creek,
while the sun threatens snow and melt both,
which seems right. We're always becoming something else
and flowing on. Happy Valentine's Day. Love Bob.

Howe's Clearing

Each May the nannyberries slowly creep
over the south stone wall. A decade fails
to change things. I mow them down as saplings,
carry stones I find beneath the garden,
dull granite pilgrims, to strengthen the walls.
I know it's futile, piling stone on stone
to stay the surge of pine and birch. The forest
craves the sagging barn, the sour ghosts of apples.

The old farmer's rocks run straight, carving out
the borders of beyond, where wild began
and settled ended. Far enough from house
and barn to call it pasture, close enough
to call it home. I work while I can, add
my sweaty stones to keep these walls alive.

K Street

Everyone seemed a stranger in that neighborhood.
Even the tan German two houses down
who yelled at you every time you cut across his lawn
turned out to be a Finn.
The only place we belonged
was that park down by the waterway,
the Intracoastal Waterway
that seemed so *natural* it had to be fake.
That park opened up for us, welcomed us
after work, with our corncob pipes
heaped with Borkum Riff that reeked of storms,
The pelicans answered all our questions intelligently.

Beyond the houses, along the sandy alleys
that stretch their telephone lines all the way to Georgia,
I've found another world, out on the Dixie Highway.
There's a man who owns a Greek deli,
with a moustache that defines Greek,
and Cuban cafes where you can live
out your entire life with nothing but coffee and sugar.
There's always bad music blaring
from behind the ferns,
and a woman with three brothers who'll cash your check.

Do you remember that old woman who lived across the street,
the one they arrested for watering her lawn
on a Thursday? After you left
she swore she knew you.
She was convinced you were the grandson
who burned all her presents,
or a delinquent godchild with amnesia
who spent the night once on his way to Ft. Lauderdale.
I told her that was impossible, that we were brothers
and our grandmother crocheted afghans
in a nursing home in the Poconos
and sent us savings bonds at the holidays.

I tried smoking that pipe you left
and mine at the same time—it's too much.
That smell makes me look for a fishing pole,
but nothing bites around here
with this foreign moon haunting the palm trees
and the night birds rearranging their songs
so that every morning I have to learn them again.

Variations on Vern

Isn't it always the trouble with Vern,
his nocturnal habits, the way
he won't stop feeling the ferns?

That, and his constant whacking of the drum.
"Music," he says, "keeps me sane,
just like always." The trouble with Vern

is he doesn't realize we watch his strange Eastern
dancing at night in the garden, a pain
he won't stop feeling. The ferns

may or may not be magic. It's not our concern,
but we have noticed how the rain
always seems to trouble Vern;

rose-petals fall in the storm
all day. The ghost remains.
It won't stop. Feeling the ferns,

spiny, and cold as rivers,
Vern never complains.
Isn't it always trouble with Vern?
He never stops feeling the ferns.

My Neighborhood

The young girls next door, the ones who laugh when Mr. Feldman slips on his frozen front steps, those sweet children find my bald head as funny as an injury. I want to introduce them to my mother, who died with hair as thick as lint, and tell them, "See, this is how we change. Each of your mothers is dying, even as Feldman cracks his spine on the stoop." My eyes are migrating, like a flounder's, to the top of my head, to the zenith of that luminous bulb from which the bravest of the girls won't remove her stare. I wiggle my veins, rolling them like a surf. "Amazing," she says, "I can see him thinking."

The Rounds: Franklin County, Vermont

The old black lab rests its head on his paws
lying in the circle worn hard by the twelve-year chain,
the forced watch of a barn that never moves. A cool rain
pulls the June grass higher. The crooked rows

of corn in the fields grow well enough
for farmers more familiar with milk and the ice-bite
of Champlain winter than the arcing height
of a solstice sun. Claude turns from the feed trough

as Pete walks down to the barn. It's the second time
he's come here in two weeks; a lot
with milk prices so low. But mud brings foot-rot
and every cow counts. Some things you can't deny.

Breech-calves, cast withers, twisted stomachs,
preg checks. The rubber-gloved arm of science
probes the black-and-white row of Holsteins,
reaching to feel uterus through intestine. "I'd say five weeks,

Claude," and on to the next. Claude marks it down.
Three lame cows and two with mastitis, swollen teats
from the full-udder drag. The morning-lit
barn groans. Manure reeks in a buzzing mound.

Out here, farms like Claude's never seem to end,
a thousand cows from Swanton to Highgate
on the Canadian line in misted meadows await
the cloud-call of stubborn overalled men

who tolerate a new vet before their trust is won.
These farm have been in the same families for years,
Magneault, Ferguson, Rocheleau, Grenier.
Pete can't tell them much. They know what they want,

and as he nears the truck, cows all done,
the lab lifts his head to bark, an instinct
gone hoarse. Claude eyes Pete to see what he thinks
about putting the old dog down;

Pete can't refuse. He kneels over the lab where it lies
and rubs its deaf ears. His work is about lives,
both ends of one. The needle flows when Claude gives
a nod, the steel stroke of master as it shivers and dies.

All There Is

You say there's only wild onions and rock,
dipping your white breathing feet into the lake.

Wild onions and rock and water
I say, taking off my shirt.

Wild onions and rock and water and sun
you say, opening your hand.

I vow there's only wild onions,
rock and water and sun

and desire.
Yes, you say,

look at the way those trout devour
the clouds as they float upon the lake.

Making Beds

This is the face of swollen roots
and folded sod, the cold grip
of stones, the transformation of worms.
The weave of quackgrass stares
its bleached frenzy of blind runners
that stitch a pasture tight.
It's amazing how like graves
these raised beds look, as if cultivating
corpses. Montana spring keeps throwing
hail at puckered tulips and flames
at dried-out range, trying to patch
the cracked order of seasons.

Fathers. It's not right to see them fall
with so much left unfinished, the loss
a first planting of the unfamiliar
that in time grows stranger, ripening
into a sweet scarred flower until finally
we harvest an abstraction we can identify.
This is the succession of bleeding

knuckles and tired kisses,
the rake's iron teeth
a last caress. Weeds burn
in a pile of their own decay.
We've imagined this land into something fertile
where what remains of the sour rot
stinks like something we can use.